Hughes Probe Touches White House

By Jack Anderson

Two federal agencies investigating the elusive billionaire Howard Hughes have discovered, to their discomfort, tracks leading right up to the White House steps.

The Internal Revenue Service has turned up evidence that $100,000 was siphoned from the Silver Slipper, a Hughes gambling emporium, for Richard Nixon's 1968 campaign. And the Securities and Exchange Commission has learned that the President's brother, Don Nixon, played a part in Hughes' maneuvers to take over the airline, Air West.

The story of the $100,000 contribution was first published in this space on Aug. 6, 1971. We reported that the gambling money was delivered by Richard Danner, a Hughes exec, to Bebe Rebozo, a Nixon confidant.

Our information was based on access to Hughes' private papers. On March 14, 1968, Hughes scribbled confidential instructions to Robert Maheu, then his chief honcho:

"I want you to go to see Nixon as my special confidential emissary. I feel there is a really valid possibility of a Republican victory this year." The phantom billionaire suggested that Nixon could win "under our sponsorship and supervision every inch of the way." We found no evidence, however, that Hughes sponsored the Nixon campaign beyond the $100,000 contribution.

Treasury agents came across the mysterious contribution as part of an investigation into Hughes' operations. They are looking into every financial deal and every expenditure that can be traced back to the billionaire.

Sources close to the investigation report that the Treasury men have questioned Danner, who now runs the Sands hotel-casino in Las Vegas for Hughes. Danner acknowledged delivering the $100,000 to Rebozo but claimed the money was intended for the GOP congressional campaign, say our sources. We also talked to Danner, but he refused all comment. Rebozo never takes our calls.

Don Nixon's Role

The Securities and Exchange Commission, meanwhile, is investigating reports that Hughes manipulated the stock of Air West to bring pressure on the directors to sell him the airline. Because the board was divided over whether to sell, it is alleged, Hughes persuaded some big stockholders to dump their stock, promising to make good their losses. This allegedly drove down the price of the stock, and the board, in panic, voted to sell.

SEC investigators learned that Maheu, in Hughes' behalf, made the first approach to Air West through Don Nixon. Maheu, summoned to Washington for secret questioning, acknowledged Nixon's role in the deal. He said that another Hughes' executive, John Meier, had made the arrangements with Nixon, who had put Maheu in touch with a board member.

Maheu denied to the SEC, however, that the President's brother had been paid a finder's fee. Don Nixon's involvement with Hughes in the Air West deal could revive the old story about the $205,000 loan Don received from the billionaire back in 1956. The loan was secured by a mortgage on a small Whittier, Calif., lot that no bank would have accepted as security for a loan of that size. The loan, so far as we can learn, was never repaid.

We reached Maheu, who had no comment, but couldn't reach Don Nixon.

It will be interesting to watch, meanwhile, whether the IRS and SEC will be willing to go ahead with investigations that could embarrass their boss in the White House.

Under the Dome

Rep. John Murphy (D-N.Y.) borrowed 25 pistols that had been seized from potential hijackers to show recently on a New York TV station to promote his anti-hijacking bill. On the return flight to Washington, he decided to check airport security for himself and stuffed the pistols in his hand luggage. He got all 25 pistols aboard, no questions asked . . . Some senators are jealous of Senate Majority Whip Bob Byrd (D-W.Va.), who arranged a private briefing on Vietnam from William Sullivan, the Deputy Secretary of State, who participated in the Paris negotiations. The senators assumed that Byrd, as one of the Senate leaders, needed the briefing for some deep foreign affairs debate. All he wanted, it turned out, was to make a good impression on a TV panel show.

When future historians examine Sen. Ted Kennedy's treasured papers, they'll find a touching, handwritten letter from Caroline Kennedy, the late President's daughter. In it, she asks her Uncle Ted, the last of the brothers, to be her godfather . . . Sen. Lowell Weicker (R-Conn.) was so afraid of airplanes that he refused to fly until he began serving on the Senate Space Committee. Then he decided that if astronauts could risk going to the moon, he could risk flying to Connecticut.

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